1: Bowen C-4 (1945-1947) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2



for the minimum winter air temperature to be in the middle forties; during this period the sea water temperature in shallow water will be in the low sixties.

Pearl diving requires that the diver's body be almost continually in the water. From experience the Arabs have found that the surface water temperature has to be about 85° F. before continued deep-water diving is feasible; thus the main pearling season (*al-ghaws al-kabir*, or "great diving") averages four months — from June into the first week of October. During this time the maximum surface water temperature exceeds 90° F. (in August) off Hasa. O'Shea states that on the Trucial Coast *al-ghaws al-kabir* often lasts until late October, the water apparently remaining warmer longer there than further north.[19] In addition to *al-ghaws al-kabir*, there are two other seasons: the "cold diving" season (*al-ghaws al-barid*) running from April to May, and the *mujannah*, running from October to March. The smaller boats run out in the shallower (warmer) waters for *al-ghaws al-barid* and act as a barometer for the season, while the *mujannah* is worked by waders who work along the shore when the tide is out, many equipped with glass-bottom "look boxes."

For *al-ghaws al-kabir* the various fleets, whether from Kuwait, Bahrein, or the Trucial Coast, leave port en masse with flags flying, to the beating of drums and Arab chants. The few boats from the smaller ports slip out without fanfare. It is a stirring sight to see these fleets of dhows maneuver with their sweeps and then set forth under huge spreads of lateen sails, with their freshly oiled, burnt-brown hulls glistening across the aquamarine water, like some ancient Phoenician or Roman fleet.

An admiral represents the pearl fishing fleet of each port. It is the admiral's boat which leaves the port first, and the admiral's duty to determine when the water becomes too cold for continuous diving. It is considered improper (by the owners) for the *nakhoda* of any large vessel to leave the pearl banks before the admiral leaves.[20]

[19] R. O'Shea, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

[20] The admiral of al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia, now works for the Arabian American Oil Company, for al-Khobar no longer sends vessels out to the pearl grounds.

hour, after which time the Kuwait diver is dragged out of the water and huddles in some spot on the ship looking more dead than alive. He may average four shifts a day, making a total of 40 dives; O'Shea states that under excellent conditions the Trucial divers average 50 dives a day.[28] During this time he has spent almost one hour under water. Ten dives are not difficult, nor are 50 excessive in one day for anyone experienced; but day after day and week after week the diving goes on — for four months. When the season is over, the diver has weathered the impossible; he has probably completed over 3,000 dives in from 30 to 50 feet of water, and has spent over 50 hours under the surface of the Persian Gulf — that is, over a full forty-hour week without air, valiantly striving to gather all the oysters he can see through his blood-shot and irritated eyes, which become less sensitive with each dive.

Every ten days or so the divers do get a day of rest, and if the *shamal* is blowing they have to wait it out, as it roils the water. Occasionally they have to go ashore to bury a diver who fails to complete his 3,000 dives. It is not surprising that there are one or two empty stations on each boat; their occupants lie huddled corpse-like under their cloaks in some part of the ship, too sick from scurvy or plain fatigue to dive. After they have been at it for many weeks, the divers are apt to get convulsive shivers when they come out of the water for their rest, even though the temperature may be 110° F. and their tenders are covered with a lather of sweat. There are few, if any, white men who could endure just one day of such punishment; the Arab could not either except for his belief that Allah is merciful and that a Paradise awaits him.

Every dhow has to put in for water and food every three weeks or so. In recent years the pearling fleet has used the oil company's pier at Ras Tanura for water, but vessels have been known to replenish their water supply from some of the submarine springs which gush into the Persian Gulf. A diver goes down with an empty skin and opens it in the potable stream; he can bring up fairly fresh water by this means. One of these submarine springs,

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case stories one hears about the amazing power of the Arabs to stay under water from 5 to 10 minutes or more are absurd.

[28] R. O'Shea, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

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feet in diameter, it is easily seen under water, and thus more easily avoided than the *dawl*. The Arabs have no fear of the sea turtle and they relate that when they find one of these on the pearl banks, they ride it to the surface by grabbing it behind the neck and directing it upward.

But the dangers from sharks and devilfish (rays) are slight compared to the physical danger resulting from simply driving oneself past the limit of human endurance. The "bends" are a common affliction among the divers and may cause severe pains in the joints, paralysis, or even death. Suppuration of the eardrums and rheumatism are also common. The divers may lose blood from surfacing too quickly or from staying under too long; Frederick Simpich tells of seeing a man come up from a 10-fathom dive bleeding at the nose as if someone had hit him with a ball bat.[21] Whitelock states that the divers of the Trucial Coast were very emaciated and suffered from inflamed eyes, which they treated with antimony.[22]

Divers never eat while working, except for a sip of tea or water, as food would cause nausea. When the sun has sunk so low that diving stops, they eat a few dates or a little rice and drink a little tea, but that is all. This is one of the reasons why they become so weakened and emaciated during a season. Sleep is the only energy builder the divers have.

### *OPENING THE OYSTERS*

With dawn the first activity of the day is the opening of the oysters caught the day before. By this time the oysters have been out of the water long enough for their shells to open, so that one does not have to fight them. The oysters are not divided according to divers, but are simply piled in sacks on the deck, so that no one knows exactly who caught the one that may contain the great pearl. After the valves are parted, the openers knead through the flesh, extract any pearls, and throw the shells and the meat overboard. Less than one-third of the oysters yield pearls and these are mostly "seed pearls," those very small irregularly-shaped pearls which might well be called "pearl dust."

[21] F. Simpich, *National Geographic Magazine*, vol. 36 (1919), pp. 369-93.
[22] H. H. Whitelock, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 44.